











Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*) at Dashields Dam, Allegheny County PA, 29 May 2010

Observer: Geoff Malosh

450 Amherst Ave.

Moon Township, PA 15108-2654

412.735.3128

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Facts:

Temperature: 80 F

Wind: unknown

Sky: partly cloudy

Time: 5:10 PM to 5:15 PM

Optics: Leica Ultravid 10x42 binoculars

Camera: Canon 50D Digital SLR, 500mm f/4L IS with 1.4x teleconverter, handheld

Photos or audio recordings: 8 photos submitted, taken from a distance ranging from perhaps 75-300 yards, attached to this message

Accompanying observers: none

Documentation date: see discussion published 30 May 2010 here:

<http://home.earthlink.net/~pomarine3/id24.html>, which was augmented during the writing of this report 4 June 2010 with additional discussion of ID features.

Submission date: 4 June 2010

Photos:

- PORC1_tern_arctic_dashieldspa_20100529_50d2_4760w.jpg
- PORC2_tern_arctic_dashieldspa_20100529_50d2_4799w.jpg
- PORC3_tern_arctic_dashieldspa_20100529_50d2_4783w.jpg
- PORC4_tern_arctic_dashieldspa_20100529_50d2_4807w.jpg
- PORC5_tern_arctic_dashieldspa_20100529_50d2_4740w.jpg
- PORC6_tern_arctic_dashieldspa_20100529_50d2_4794w.jpg
- PORC7_tern_arctic_dashieldspa_20100529_50d2_4763w.jpg
- PORC8_tern_arctic_dashieldspa_20100529_50d2_4764w.jp

- PORC9_tern_arctic_dashieldspa_20100529_50d2_4806w.jpg

All photos are cropped from the original frame and reduced slightly to their current file size. Photos are prefixed PORC1 through PORC9 and are referenced as such below.

Observation:

Shortly after 5 PM on 29 May 2010, and after a short and unsuccessful attempt to photograph nesting Spotted Sandpipers on the riverbank at Dashields Dam (Ohio River) in western Allegheny County, I noticed two terns over the dam from my position downriver (about 500 yards away). Thinking they'd turn out to be Common Terns, I raised my camera which was already prepared following the sandpiper attempt. The birds flew over the dam and headed downriver in my direction. Through the viewfinder, I realized I could not see any markings on the upperwings; instead they were a clean light gray. I put the birds in binoculars to have a close look at the underwing pattern and saw nothing but a thin dark line on the trailing edge of the outer primaries. At this point I suspected that the two were in fact Arctic Terns, and I began to take as many pictures as I could. Even through the comparatively lesser magnification of the camera lens, I could easily make out dark reddish bills, both with a measure of a dusky tip (one considerably more than the other), generally gray bodies, and a long-tailed, front-heavy appearance in flight. The birds circled back to the dam at least once, and if my memory serves, also made a shorter second loop around the dam area before turning downriver for the final time and heading into Beaver County and out of sight. The entire encounter was between 5 and 10 minutes in duration. Though I was almost completely sure I had two Arctics, I personally do not have much experience with the species outside of two days at Potter Marsh, AK in June 2009, so I still couched the identification as "probable" as I began to call other birders to get the word out, based primarily on the apparent length of the bill and the amount of duskiess at the bill tips, which were at odds with my experience and "book knowledge" at the time.

Description and Discussion:

One of the two was seen and photographed better than the other. I believe photos PORC1 through PORC6 are all of this better-seen bird, which I will refer to as the "first" bird. PORC7 and PORC8 are of the "second" bird, which, as will be seen, is also clearly an Arctic, but based on the bill pattern, I remained less than 100% sure of the ID of this second bird in the aftermath of the sighting, until I was able to research and consult with birders that have more experience with the species than I have.

Photos PORC1 and PORC2 show the first bird's upperwing pattern, as well as the overall structure: generally small headed with the wings appearing to be set far forward on the bird's body. The upperwing is basically a clean light gray, unique to Arctic Tern among red-billed North American terns. Common Tern at this time of year, as a result of its distinct molt strategy, should show a distinct dark wedge on the outer 5 or 6 primaries on the upperwing. Note too that the bill is nearly all red, with just a hint of a dusky tip.

Photos PORC3, PORC4, and PORC5 show a dark thin line on the underside of the outer primaries. Note that the dark tips are very limited, forming a well defined thin line down the trailing edge of the outer wing. Note also, particularly in PORC3, that distinctly dark tips can be seen on the outer seven primaries, with a limited dark tip on the eighth. Again this pattern is unique to Arctic Tern, with Common normally showing a thicker and less organized area of dark on the trailing edge, which is also normally limited to just the outer five or six primaries. PORC5 also shows the bird in good profile, where it displays a nicely thin, tapered look, compared to the larger and bulky look typically shown by a Common.

PORC6 shows well the nature of the dark cap on this first bird, and the extent of the dark tip to the bill. Arctic Terns generally show the smallest bills among the *Sterna* terns that they may be

confused with, yet this bird shows a bill that, to me, appears to be on the large end of variation, though note that some male Arctics can show a bill as long as the shortest Commons. In short I do not think the bill is "too big". Also somewhat odd about this bird is the shape of the dark cap. Generally, of the North American terns that might be mistaken for Arctic, Arctic has the "lowest slung" dark cap on the front of its face, showing the least amount of white between the bottom edge of the cap and the gape of the bill. In PORC6, you can clearly see that the area of white below the cap is quite noticeable and larger than most reference photos of Arctic Tern I could find (including my own images from Potter Marsh in June 2009).

Still, after research and discussion with more knowledgeable people, neither of these features is outside the range of variation for Arctic Tern.

PORC7 and PORC8 show the second bird. As with the first bird, it looks like a typical Arctic Tern in all respects except the bill. It has the clean upperwing, the thin trailing line on the underwing, the thin tapered body, and the "top-heavy" look with the wings set forward on the body. But the bill on this bird seems even longer, with an even more extensively dusky tip than the other bird. Again, research and discussion after the fact revealed that this was not out of the range for Arctic, despite the fact that when I first looked at these pictures on the back of the camera and even later on my computer screen, the bill appeared very odd to me.

PORC9, also of the first bird, does not add anything additional of substance to the discussion not already revealed by the first 8 photos, but it is the best photo I made from a technical standpoint, so it is included here.

Prior experience:

My close-range experience with Arctic Tern is limited to two afternoons spent at Potter Marsh south of Anchorage, AK in June 2009. I have also (poorly) seen a handful of Arctic Terns on various pelagic trips over the years. These were my first for Pennsylvania.

References consulted after the sighting:

Kaufman, Kenn. 1990. *Advanced Birding*. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. (Chapter 18, "The Medium-sized Terns", pp. 134-149.)

Various websites.

Geoff Malosh | Editor, *Pennsylvania Birds*

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Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*

Date of Sighting: 29 May 2010 to 29 May 2010

County : ALLEGHENY

Location : DASHIELDS DAM

Observer(s): Geoff Malosh

Date of Submission: 2010

Submitted by: Geoff Malosh

Written Description: Yes

Photo: Yes

Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
D. DeReamus	X							
A. Guarente	X							
T. Johnson	X							
B. Coulter	X							
C. Rutt	X							
J. Heller	X							
G. Malosh	X							
TOTALS	7							
DECISION	X							

Comments: 7/0

Signature (Secretary) Nick Pulcinella

Date: 2/9/11